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SUBJECT: THESSALONIKI: GOG INVITES FORMER ADVERSARIES TO NATIONAL DAY CELEBRATIONS FOR FIRST TIME

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: In a reconciliatory gesture, Defense Minister of Greece Evangelos Meimarakis invited his counterparts from Turkey, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia and other outtheastern European countries, to attend the traditional military parade on Greece's national day, October 28 (Greece's entry into WWII). All invited countries sent representatives, except Macedonia. For the first time since 1948, the Italian ambassador attended the parade. Remarks by the Greek President and MOD stressed support for regional cooperation and integration, with indirect but pointed remarks about the need for some Balkan countries to let go of "historical falsifications." The parade was largely uneventful, except for some nationalistic chanting by one group of former soldiers ("Macedonia is Greek, we will never give it to Skopje"). National media and most political parties reacted positively to the MOD's initiative. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) For the first time in the post-World War II era, the GoG invited the Defense Ministers of all southeastern European countries to the annual military parade that took place in Thessaloniki, on October 28, Greece's national day. Meimarakis, who extended the invitation and was the Prime Minister's official representative to the parade, was an active and attentive host, providing his guests an extensive program of events, including two dinners with the President of the Republic. Defense Ministers of Turkey, Bosnia, Montenegro and Cyprus, the Deputy Ministers of Defense of Bulgaria and Albania and the Secretaries General of the Ministries of Defense of Croatia and Serbia attended the festivities. There were no representatives of the Macedonian Ministry of Defense, which declined the invitation.

¶3. (U) Italy was represented at the parade by its Ambassador to Greece Gianpaolo Scarante, in a move that was hailed by the Italian newspaper "Corriere della Sera" as "an end to an imaginary crisis." Thessaloniki daily "Makedonia" also applauded the initiative, calling it "extremely interesting". [Note: On October 28 1940, Greek PM Metaxas received an ultimatum from Mussolini's ambassador to surrender or be invaded. Metaxas refused to surrender (famously saying "alors, c'est la guerre", which has been abbreviated to "OXI" -Greek for "No". Hence, the day is also called "OXI Day.") Greece successfully defended itself against the Italian attack which marked Greece's entry into World War II. End note]

¶4. (U) President of the Republic Papoulias commended Minister of Defense Meimarakis on his initiative, noting the need for "a new chapter in the region, based on respect for human rights and a spirit of peaceful co-existence." He also praised the foreign dignitaries who attended, "despite the criticism they may have received in their countries." Indirectly referring to Macedonia, he urged Balkan countries to "walk the road to Europe, leaving behind illusions and historical falsifications". MoD Meimarakis also spoke obliquely about Macedonia when he said "we are sending a message to all the others that we, at the regional level, can reach understanding amongst

ourselves~despite different assessments and views, overcome these issues and find the climate of confidence and the solutions necessary in order to move forward with our eyes turned to the future." Most media and political parties reacted positively, with the exception of far-right LAOS which called it "out of place," based on Greece's outstanding issues with some of these countries (Turkey, Macedonia, Albania). The two-hour military parade was largely uneventful, except for one brief incident of chanting by uniformed former special forces soldiers (veterans) in one group of marchers: "Macedonia is Greek, we will never give it to Skopje!"

15. (SBU) COMMENT: The presence of senior MOD officials from southeast Europe, including former adversaries Turkey, Bulgaria, Albania and Croatia, was widely viewed in northern Greece (the heart of Greek nationalism) as a sign of growing reconciliation, solidarity and Greek leadership in the region. With the exception of the nationalistic chanting incident during the parade (which is not uncommon for this event), the tone of the parade and other national day events was positive and mostly forward-looking. President Papoulias, MOD Meimarakis and local officials appeared determined to send the message that Greece wants to heal old wounds and move ahead. Notably, Greek official were relatively mute on the name issue and did not seek to exploit Macedonia's absence from the festivities for domestic political purposes. END COMMENT.

YEE